

# Game Day Coaching

## The weekend contest should be viewed as an extension of the weekday training sessions

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The weekend soccer game at the youth level should be viewed as the second or third coaching session of the week, not as an independent entity. It is a wonderful opportunity to observe how effective our training sessions have been up to that point, specifically those that have been delivered in the previous week. For example, if we have been working on passing and movement in training but see no evidence of it during the game then we know that we need to reinforce and supplement our work in this area. Thus our primary consideration is continual development.

With long-term development in mind, the coach should produce a flexible, season-long plan that ensures sharply focused training sessions and continuity between sessions. Each practice should build on the previous ones – reinforcing what has already been covered, and the game should be an integral part of that “coaching unit” (i.e. keeping possession). There is a temptation to coach everything on game day. However, if the coach does not remain focused on this key unit, why should the players? If the players do not focus on the key unit, how can we assess learning?

Unfortunately, within the frenzied excitement of game day it is all too easy to be caught up in the thrill of winning. The coach sometimes feels judged on his/her record of wins and losses and this can undoubtedly affect their approach towards the game. This often manifests itself in a risk-free “kick the ball hard and chase” philosophy which may be supported by an unknowledgeable parent audience. Worse still, one may see the hysterical berating of young children which so often accompanies a results-driven approach. Of course, this strategy may win games in the short term but it will surely hinder the longer-term development and enjoyment of the players.

Game day is an exciting experience for everyone concerned, but it first and foremost is about the children. Parents should have a simple but important role to play: they should constantly encourage and cheer for their team. Their role is to support, not coach, the players. This should be made clear from the start of the season; otherwise the children are exposed to too much conflicting, subjective and varied instruction.

### THE WARMUP

On game day the players should arrive at a set time period before kickoff so that they can prepare physically and mentally for the game. The coach should find a suitable area – preferably free of distractions -- and have the players perform some activities with a ball before they stretch a little. At the youth level it is not necessary to spend a great deal of time stretching, but a basic routine will educate the players in good habits.

Some teams like to have a set warm-up structure that includes some passing and shooting, while others prefer to tailor their warmup to the theme of the week, which may be defending, passing, shooting etc. Either way the routine should increase in intensity as game time gets closer. During this time the coach also should take the opportunity to talk to individuals as necessary with respect to their role for that game.

### PRE-GAME INSTRUCTION

Before the game begins it is important to take five minutes to deliver clear, simple pre-game instructions.

During this time the players are notified of the starting lineup and are given three key points as to what the team will attempt to do. Any more than this will overload the young players. They also should be told to go out and really enjoy the game and to do their best for their team.

### COACHING THE GAME

The first 10 minutes of the game should be used to observe as much as possible. Let the children play and get into the flow of the game. If you are over-coaching and too involved at this point, you will not be objective in your observation. Points to consider during this observation:

- Are the players attempting to carry out your instructions with relation to the theme of the week?
- Are they maintaining their basic shape as a team as they move up and down the field?

At a more advanced level you also would be looking at your opponent's formation, style of play, strengths and weaknesses. However, at this age the main factors for winning are typically not tactical but more linked to athleticism (speed and strength), basic skills and technique. With this in mind if a match-up between two players clearly is biased in the opposition's favor, you may consider a positional change. A player often develops quickly when playing against someone who is slightly stronger, but loses confidence against someone clearly superior.

The temptation for most youth coaches is to over-coach during the game and give the players too much information to assimilate. They simply are too involved. This is particularly the case when the player in possession of the ball is being coached. The coach should never address this player or be making their decisions for them (though it can be tempting!). For instance, there is no educational value in shouting “Pass! Pass!” to a player dribbling up the field. If he or she passes after our dictate, what does that tell us about the learning process? We will be more effective by speaking calmly and concisely to players who are not immediately involved in the play or after they have just made a play. It also can be good practice to instruct players when the ball is out of bounds. In this way they are listening to you and understanding you rather than making every single play based on your demands.

Throughout the game it is essential that the coach remain positive with the players despite any frustrations. The children are at a sensitive age and seek the approval of adults. Negative, disparaging comments will adversely affect their level of enjoyment. This is not appropriate. Neither is it appropriate for the coach to direct negative comments toward the officials. The referee has a tough enough job without being criticized by the coach. Coaches should try to respect all decisions of referees with a sense of calm detachment, which will then be followed by the players.

The coach is without doubt a role model for the children whether he/she likes it or not. The choice is whether to be a positive or negative role model. Whichever way, the children will begin to emulate the coach's behavior.

## HALFTIME INSTRUCTION

At halftime it is important to give the players a couple of minutes to take a drink, rest and compose themselves before speaking to them. Your instructions can be a combination of what the team is doing well and what the team should look to improve upon. At this point you also may choose to address some of the opponent's strengths and weaknesses – with a view to encouraging problem-solving. Again, be careful not to overload the players. Individual coaching can take place immediately before the players enter the field for the second half. Send the players out with a positive, motivational statement, not an ultimatum. Remember, they should be playing for fun and development.

## SUBSTITUTING PLAYERS

At this age the players all should be receiving playing time and also should at some point during the season have opportunities to start the game. This ensures that the weaker players have the necessary time to develop and retain a healthy degree of confidence. When substituting players, ensure that those going into the game have been warmed up and spoken to regarding their role and how it relates to the team's objectives.

Those coming out also should be spoken to regarding their performance. This is best done after they have taken a drink and have composed themselves. Begin with a positive statement, give them feedback as to what they may have done better, then end with an encouraging comment. This form of communication has been termed the "feedback sandwich." It is designed to improve the player while keeping self-esteem and confidence intact.

When considering a substitution policy, it should be remembered that it takes time to adjust to a position. Playing two positions during a

game may give the player an opportunity to develop his/her all-round game. However, to place the player in more than two positions during one game can be very confusing at this age, or indeed at any age.

## THE ROLE OF THE BENCH

There is a temptation at this age for the players to completely "switch off" when they are not involved in the game. This behavior can range from complete disinterest in the game to activities that are distracting to coaches and players alike. The children should be encouraged to take a drink after being substituted and then stand together on the sideline, near enough to the coach that he/she can speak to them about the game. Their role should be twofold: first to take an active interest in the game and second to cheer for their teammates. The coach could even give them a specific area to focus on, e.g. what is the highest number of consecutive passes that our team makes before losing possession?

Active observation will develop the children's understanding of the game and also will foster team spirit. If this is implemented, their rest time will be well spent.


## POST-GAME COMMENTS

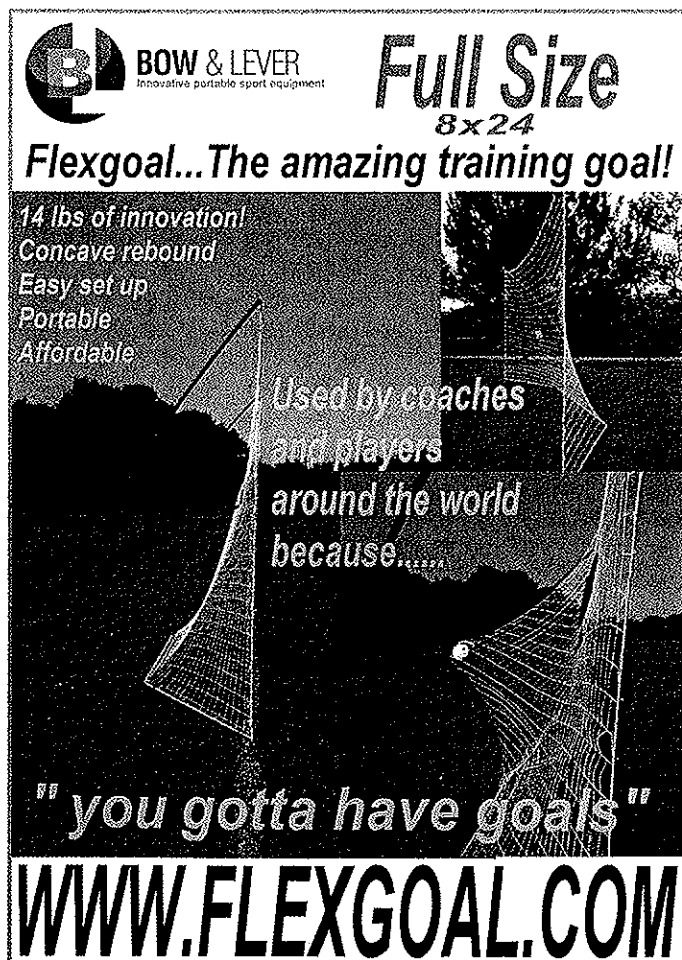
After the players have shaken hands with the opposition, sit them down and allow them to compose themselves and take a drink. Take this opportunity to address the successes and weaknesses of the game, especially relating to the theme of the week. Most of all send the players away with some positive comments and a smile on their faces. Enjoyment is paramount.

## CONCLUSION

The most effective youth coaches:

Do...	Do Not...
Remain positive	Become negative
Guide players	Command players without explanation
Have a substitution policy	Substitute without thought or reason
Speak to substituted players	Presume players know how they performed
Vary positions	"Pigeon hole" players
Coach players without the ball	Coach players in possession
Respect opponents	Berate officials or players
Accept decisions calmly	Look to blame anyone for events on the field
Enjoy themselves	Let frustrations show
Keep things in perspective	Measure achievement solely by results

It is essential that we understand that in soccer, particularly, the game is the best teacher. We, the coaches and trainers, are facilitators whose main work is predominantly done in practice and certainly before the game begins. The perfect team performance that we strive for will rarely occur, so let's be realistic and celebrate the smaller successes as they unfold, regardless of the final result. 



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